

'A SKYROCKET WAITING TO BE LET OFF', BUT TO
WHERE? CHRISTINA STEAD'S FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF
THE UNITED STATES AND HER POSTWAR LITERARY
REHABILITATION

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Christina Stead was, as Jose Yglesias rightly highlighted in 1965, a product of the 1930s—its controversies and epochal events had indelibly shaped her novels and diverse pronouncements. The occasion was a review of the recently reissued *The Man Who Loved Children*, about which he made a number of crucial, dissenting points. Whereas others focused on the book's extraordinary human insights or, like Jarrell in his highly influential prefatory essay, praised it as an unforgettable, rarely equalled portrayal of family life, Yglesias insisted that 'Marxist ideas ... are inseparable from Stead's literary vision'.¹ They are 'what organizes her emotions and talent, what lends tension and drive to her creative process', and what ultimately 'has delayed her recognition'. Speaking of the novel itself he observed that, 'although it may be possible to ignore this now, as Jarrell does in his essay, it was, consciously or unconsciously, impossible in 1941'. Finally, he remarked presciently that, given the antipathy of 'our present establishment ... to Stead's ideology', it may be 'possible, as it happened with Brecht, to extract many important subsidiary virtues from her novels'. Current feminist interpretations would figure highly among these, as would autobiographical

1 . Quotations are from his 'Marx as Muse', in *Nation* 100 (1965): 368–70.

readings.² And Stead, in fascinating ways, confirmed the keenness of Yglesias' commentary. An unremarked, expanded version of it, marked 'Rough Galley', exists among her collection of reviews,³ so that she was presumably consulted about its contents before it went to press. After its appearance, she disingenuously feigned surprise at Yglesias' remarks to one correspondent ('I have just been proclaimed a "Marxian muse" to everyone's astonishment, my own not least'), whereas to Stanley Burnshaw, with whom she had long exchanged private, at times heretical opinions, she was more candid: 'I do like the Jose Yglesias review very much, it is pertinent and canny'.⁴ This comment amounts to acknowledgement of the centrality of Marxist ideology in her writing, and is further strengthened by the fact that she had apparently vetted the review; however, the Marxist dimension of her work has generally been overlooked, and nowhere received the detailed treatment it merits.⁵

2 See, for example, Joan Lidoff, *Christina Stead* (New York: Ungar, 1982); Judith Kegan Gardiner, 'Male Narcissism, Capitalism and the Daughter of *The Man Who Loved Children*' in Lynda E. Brose and Betty S. Flowers, eds, *Daughters and Fathers* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), rpt. in Margaret Harris, ed., *The Magic Phrase: Critical Essays on Christina Stead* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000), pp. 145–62; Diana Brydon, *Christina Stead* (Totowa: Barnes & Noble, 1987); Susan Sheridan, *Christina Stead* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1993); and Louise Yelin, *From the Margins of Empire: Christina Stead, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

3 National Library of Australia, MS. 4967, folder 80.

4 Quoted in Rowley, *Christina Stead*, p. 612. I have chosen throughout to quote from Rowley's original version of the biography rather than the most recent 'new edition', published by Melbourne University Press in 2007. It alone contains this information, for the alleged newness of the later edition rests not on further insights, nor on the incorporation of a decade and a half of Stead scholarship, but mainly on the deletion of approximately twenty per cent of the original text to create a tighter, more reader-friendly narrative. As Rowley observed at the time of the relaunch: 'I like to think I've become a sharper storyteller through the years and more economical with words' ('The Mocking Country', *Weekend Australian*, 25–26 August 2007, p. 9).

5 Sporadic calls for revising the place of Marxism in her work do, however, occur. See, for instance, Michael Ackland, 'Realigning Christina Stead', *Overland*, 192 (2008): 49–53 and 'Literary Politics and the Cold War: The Case of Christina

Instead commentary intent on her literary rehabilitation has tended to downplay the extent of her ideological commitment. According to the Australian's principal biographer, for instance, Stead was an author passionately driven to write and create characters, her 'commitment was to her writing, not politics',⁶ as if the two were discreet, rather than mutually nourishing spheres, while Rowley and others have treated Stead's political interests as being largely a reflection of passion for male Marxist intellectuals, such as Ralph Fox and William J. Blake. Thus commentary has failed to take at face value her occasionally outspoken radicalism, as in her report on the 1935 Writers' Congress in Paris which she attended as a member of the British delegation. Doctrinaire passages, readers are told, 'sound like Bill Blech [Blake]; he probably helped her with the article',⁷ and palliating reasons are urged for the work's political bias: 'her impassioned rhetoric probably appealed to her communist readers rather than reflecting deeply felt convictions'.⁸ Such assertions not only amount to special pleading and wishful thinking, they are also curiously disempowering of Stead. They imply that after seven years in Europe and massive international crises she had yet to form firm opinions of her own. Her account of the congress suggests otherwise. There she reiterates the need for writers to 'study politics', acknowledges 'the frightful insistence of the economic question',⁹ and adds her voice to the chorus urging commitment—to such good effect that in 1936 she could credibly be 'invited to spend six months in Moscow to work on International Literature'.¹⁰

This depoliticising tendency is discernible as well in the editing of selected manuscript works. The most important of these published

Stead, *Pacific and American Studies* 10 (2010): 50–65; Stephen Cowden, 'Christina Stead and the 'Marxist Imaginary'', *Southerly* 63 (2003): 63–75; and Brigid Rooney, 'Loving the Revolutionary: Re-reading Christina Stead's Encounter with Men, Marxism and the Popular Front in 1930s Paris', *Southerly* 58 (1998): 84–102.

6 Rowley, p. 254.

7 Rowley, p. 173.

8 Rowley, p. 172.

9 'The Writer Takes Sides', *Left Review* 1.2 (1935): 453.

10 Letter to Gilbert Stead, dated 25 January 1937, in Christina Stead, *A Web of Friendship: Selected Letters (1928–1973)*, R.G. Geering, ed. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992), p. 71.

to date is undoubtedly *I'm Dying Laughing* which, according to Anne Pender, 'uses only a fraction of Stead's drafts'.¹¹ In particular, 'extended passages dramatising the politics of the protagonists' have been omitted, as well as 'much of the political material that Stead had worked so hard to provide'.¹² Repeatedly Pender hesitates to attribute motives to the editor, R.G. Geering, one of Stead's major postwar proselytisers and later her literary executor. She notes only that such omissions accorded well with his stated belief that 'novel is "concerned primarily with character and morality"', although more sweepingly (and correctly) Pender observes: 'In all his critical writing on Stead's novels, Geering downplayed the political content, and rejected any notion of a determinist element in the relationship between character and society'.¹³ Similar observations hold true for his editing of the manuscript headed 'America'.¹⁴ This describes Stead's first impressions of the US, when she lived there from approximately July 1935 to May 1936. The manuscript, consisting of

11 "Scorched Earth": Washington and the Missing Manuscript of *I'm Dying Laughing*, *Australian Literary Studies* 21 (2004): 235.

12 Pender, pp. 241, 234.

13 Pender, p. 241.

14 The United States holds a crucial but often neglected place in Stead's intellectual formation. Apart from living four decades with an intellectual from that country in Blake, Stead visited it initially for almost a year midway through the decade, then again in August 1936, for what became a decade-long sojourn till her return to Europe in December 1946. Presumably, too, its economic and political turmoil in the wake of the Wall Street Crash has ensured it of a prominent place in her thinking long before she disembarked in Boston. Baruch Mendelsohn, one of her most impressive socialist protagonists, sets off for its shore to complete his political education at the end of her first novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934), while her Parisian speculators in *House of All Nations* (1938), set in the early 1930s, keep a sharp weather-eye on the American share market and mounting signs of democracy's failure there. Her two stays in America have, of course, been treated at considerable length in two major biographies: Rowley pp. 181–206, pp. 236–340 and Williams, pp. 115–16, pp. 123–69. Yet even the more detailed account of the two has major shortcomings. Although it describes the main stations in Stead's ideological pilgrimage, and acknowledges her communist affiliations and friendships, this is done in a piece-meal fashion, rather than as a coherent examination of Stead's lifelong intellectual interests. These are secondary to probing the effects of authorial traumas and passionate relationships, to speculating on what was happening in Stead's heart rather than in her head.

seven single-spaced, typed pages and more than 3900 words, was obviously a work in progress. Clearly, too, it was formulated during a period of pronounced political engagement, midway between the Paris Writers' Congress and an enthusiastic trip later in 1936 to Spain, where republican and communist forces were in the ascendancy.¹⁵ This ardour permeates the original—but not a shorter, tidier version of these notes, totalling about 1450 words, which appeared nearly half a century later under the heading: 'It is all a scramble for boodle: Christina Stead sums up America.'¹⁶ The posthumously supplied title is highly revelatory not of Stead's, but of the editor's putative intentions. At a stroke it recasts ideologically tendentious material as a familiar diatribe against American materialism. Certainly the Geering-edited version gives a fair sampling of scenes from the original, but selective omissions downplay its political orientation, and specifically Stead's preoccupation with evidence of smouldering class warfare, which accorded well with the official Comintern line that 'class struggle in America' must assume 'an extremely tense and revolutionary character'.¹⁷ In addition, Geering's text disrupts the argumentative structure and implicit polemic of the original, thereby adding to the apparent innocuousness of Stead's comments, while it obscures a wealth of information about where Stead stood intellectually midway through the 1930s—shortfalls which the ensuing discussion of her original manuscript, the first to date, is intended to redress.

As usual Stead's ideological position and reading of social history are orthodoxly Marxist, though, with her customary flair, she presents her material as a dawning revelation, rather than as a polemical platform. Her uncut text is concerned with ways of seeing or knowing the United States. It distinguishes sharply between the image of the country disseminated popularly, through musicals and especially the cinema,

15 See her MS. account of this sojourn, rpt. in R.G. Geering, 'From the Personal Papers of Christina Stead', *Southerly* 50 (1990): 399–400.

16 *Australian Book Review* 141 (June 1992): 22–24.

17 Third Congress report, qtd. in Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform*, Brian Pearce, trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 66.

and impressions made by direct contact with American society: at first superficially, then with greater insight. In its posthumously published form, however, the third and often highly judgmental phase of Stead's encounter is largely omitted, thereby rendering many of her remarks, like those in the following passage, banal, inconsequential and politically low key or neutral:

I come from a commonwealth which loves America, regards it as the rising English-speaking nation, which imitates its fads, whistles its way down every crotchet of tinpan alley and whose constitution is founded on your own, whose labour movement is as strong, whose love of liberty still lingers as fresh and whose schoolchildren dream more of ninepins in the Catskills than of the arrows of Robin Hood. I visited the memorials of your war of liberation with a sort of patriotic fervour.¹⁸

Why be concerned with Robin Hood in realms so abundant that the people whistle and can indulge in pleasant pastimes? What need of arrows if there is neither oppressive nobility nor social injustice? Moreover, with law-enforcers and blue-collar workers addressing each other as 'buddy' in ensuing scenes, with 'officials of all sorts, amiable and not obsequious', the newly arrived observer is most favourably struck by the contrast with 'the brass hats and brass buttons of Europe'. There hierarchical structures and aristocratic influence predominate, dispensing lessons in fortitude and the iniquity of lucre 'to prevent the workers from wanting food, clothing and warmth'. In contemporary Boston, though perhaps not yet Bellamy's utopian city, all seem to partake of material wellbeing, so that 'the first day ... I thought I was in a sort of socialist commonwealth'. Admittedly, the edited text ends this lengthy peroration with a vivid image of poverty: 'Under the beautiful sky of Boston, under its bright lights, beside its fine bay is the rottenest slum in my experience'. But it leaves unanswered the crucial question implicitly raised by the original text: what need has such a land today of the 'love of liberty', that still exists as fresh as in 'stirring times'?

18 *Australian Book Review*, p. 23.

The unedited narrative turns on her realisation of the true state of affairs in this dazzlingly affluent nation. Its opening line evokes Hollywood's glamorous, compelling visions, only to destabilise them in the next breath, foreshadowing the ambivalence and binaries that will shape her account: 'After an extensive night-course on American society under C.B. DeMille and Sam Goldwyn we sailed for the land of boundless importunity'.¹⁹ On arrival the signs are propitious. Instead of racial conflict, she observes African-Americans lunching at ease with whites in a coffee shop, food is plentiful and cheap, public libraries as opulent as palaces, skyscrapers more awesome and beautiful than imagined. As well there are numerous indices of untapped, prodigious energy that makes her think of 'a skyrocket waiting to be let off' or, in the reassuring rhetoric of settler societies holding out the promise of material betterment: 'This is the land of riches, I thought, the only place in the world to bring up children' (23). But celluloid projections and superficial bonhomie deflect attention from a darker side, which is omitted from the published text:

Later I am to have the impression that a guerrilla civil war is [going] on: cops wear obvious guns, strange vehicles, armoured cars with meurtieres [loop-holes] run through the streets, fighting is going on in the mills at [Salem?]²⁰ and men and women are shot, they are marching to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Sacco and Vanzetti, pickets are everywhere, policemen watch the pickets with detestation.

Then follow vignettes of visits to Lexington, venerated for its fallen patriots ('Americans shed tears at the sight'), to Concord, 'where we meet farmers from the far west' come 'to look at the monument to the

19 Unless otherwise noted, her judgements on America are quoted from National Library of Australia, MS. 4967 folder 79. A rough working text entitled 'AMERICA', it contains occasional typographical and other errors which I have silently corrected in the interests of readability.

20 The text at this point is rendered indecipherable by a Stead deletion. Later in the MS., however, she mentions similar disturbances in Salem, hence my conjectural reading here.

“embattled farmers”’, and finally to Walden, ever-linked with memories ‘of the famous anarchist Thoreau’. Stead visited the same memorials, she confesses, ‘with a sort of patriotic fervour’, inspired no doubt by inklings of what she later signals: that Americans will not eternally abide tyranny, that they too have a proud tradition of revolution, and that even the most disadvantaged groups, such as impoverished small farmers, may like herself awaken one day to grim reality, and rise again in a second, and much needed, ‘war of liberation’. This was Stead’s mindset in 1935.

Undoubtedly Stead is critical of American materialism, of the country’s obsession with ‘boodle’, but as part of a larger analysis of local class structures, and the power of money to create and dissipate tensions in the midst of a worldwide crisis. Although her later novels would convincingly dramatise the pitiless, sordid peaks of this social pyramid, her early jottings scarcely rise above clichés: ‘the upper classes moneyseeking, hard, corrupt, cruel, and careless of Maecenas bounties’—with so much wealth a little can be offered to placate opinion and recast oneself as an enlightened philanthropist—as well as ‘ruthless, wideawake and class-conscious; self-satisfied and determined that everyone will go down before them’. In spite of bank failures, currency depreciation and accumulated losses, the moneyed classes were still ‘fooling themselves with hope of an upturn’. Socialism was ‘distrusted’, while alarmingly the bourgeoisie, in America as in Europe, was determined to maintain its possessions and privileges, if need be, by the most desperate political means, or in the leftist shorthand of the day that flowed glibly from Stead’s pen: ‘Babbitry and its works are certain foci of fascist infection here’. According to ideologues, such as Stead, this predictable recourse to fascism was the last act of a doomed social order, and a sure sign that ‘the universality of the crisis’ of advanced capitalism was reaching its climax.²¹ Its overthrow was only a matter of time—unless democracy could reinvent itself. And America, which had long led the world in economic and political innovation, had once again become a key laboratory for social experimentation, and the Roosevelt presidency its acid test.

21 Letter to Gwen Walker-Smith, dated 24 November 1930, in *A Web of Friendship*, p. 36.

By the time of Stead's arrival in 1935, the Roosevelt administration was nearing the end of its first term in office, the New Deal remained as contentious as ever, but her notes are silent on these matters.²² Their concern, after all, is with initial impressions, not already-held political convictions; however, they do focus on a closely related subject, American self-imaging, or the popularly disseminated projection versus mundane actuality. 'We do not make pictures,' she quotes the local film director Zukor as saying 'with any idea of depicting real life but only as fiction and entertainment'. Her notes of 1935 highlight this gap. They begin with her reportedly expecting 'that Americans are incurably tough, cruel wisecrackers, snipers of the gibe that kills, machine-gunners of quickfire backchat, muckrakers of private potholes and broadcasters of human shame'. Instead she finds her interlocutors surprisingly slow, genial and dull.

Far from spitting fire, only after going off the deep-end into a pool of thought and coming up and breathing and shaking their ears would they drag into the conversation some half-drowned pun or dead tale, squat-footed, faithful through the years, strangely dumb.

There is little sign of investigative, much less revolutionary, spark here, or of those word-plays, 'rising to fusion-point', which she contends can be 'symptomatic of social earth-tremors'. Rather her description suggests total, loyal immersion in one's environment, as well as blinkered adherence to conventional patterns of thought: in short, a habitual complacency that might explain the failure of the local Communist Party to make greater inroads into the electorate. Such a dumbly trusting people, too, might be taken in by the noisy, self-promoting Roosevelt regime. Nevertheless, Stead is hopeful. The passage concludes with her

²² Elsewhere Stead showed little patience with the president and his New Deal policies, and spoke contemptuously of Roosevelt as 'God's Gift to The Americas', who spoke 'with a lot of fumbling, blundering, anxiety and crossness: he is no longer the guy who jumped cheerfully to power on the hopes of the forgotten man, that's certain', letter to William Blake, dated 28 May 1942, rpt. in Margaret Harris, ed., *Dearest Muntz: The Letters of Christina Stead and William J. Blake* (Melbourne: Miegunyah, 2005), p. 142.

treasured image of the country's potential maintained in spite of contradictory impressions: 'But I still think that America, like other raw youths, likes to spar up to [the] bathroom mirror with bristling teeth and gory propositions to get into shape for the business of the day'. The nation she envisages is young, loud and bellicose, but presumably hardly knows either its own strength or where its real interests lie, and has yet to be moulded into its mature shape.

This lack of self-awareness, together with the pressing issues of the day, potentially assured the committed writer of an invigorating, but danger-fraught role, which emerges in a section of her 1935 notes headed 'American Art'. It is immediately characterised as 'the stage the most living outside of Russia'—high praise indeed from a Marxist-Leninist, but anathema during the Cold War and omitted by Geering. The accolade is earned by the way American artists are allegedly responding to the current crisis. Unable to take pride in the nation's consuming quest for wealth, its 'blatant money-religion', liberals are driven 'further and further left', while middle-class artists are left 'without a decent theme but that of the working classes in revolt'. Predictably, too, the working-classes are to be the source of 'American new literature' and, with 'their sympathisers', of 'all fresh intellectual life'. This glib analysis sounds reassuringly doctrinaire; however, it contains Stead's usual caveats. The proletariat as crucial theme is confirmed, but it is not the sole predestined maker of the art of the future, a role which Stead ascribes confrontationally to autocratic, middle-class intellectuals like herself: 'art is dependent on great individuals and artists should learn from each of the peculiar visions of these great [creators]'. The approach to proletarian literature, affirmed here, is refreshingly heterodox, and likely to be driven more by the dictates of individual genius and subject matter than strict adherence to the party line.²³ Stead, however, stops well short of embracing bourgeois subjectivity, or its fallacious aspirations. Instead she ticks off the *fata morganas* that have failed it:

23 On Stead's own early treatment of the proletariat in fiction see Michael Ackland, "'What a history is that? What an enigma ...?': Imagination, Destiny and Socialist Imperatives in Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*', *Southerly* 68 (2008): 189–212.

'the dream of endless wealth (stock market) and of the presidency (old families coming in)', as well as the risible pap of Hollywood ('so foolish that directors admit they do not try to portray contemporary life'). Only the promise of the proletariat remains undiminished: 'the working-classes offer an ideology, a hope, a dream, you offer nonesuch and the middle-classes cannot live by a savings-bank account alone.' Perhaps in 1935, caught up in the rush of epochal events and surrounded by communist comrades, the fragility of this dream may not have been self-evident. But who was to say that it had any more substance than former, 'slowly fading' ones? And who could guarantee that American society might not yet offer other, and more inspiring, narratives to its people than the foreordained dictatorship of the proletariat?

Asserting artistic independence did not of course preclude dramatising and projecting a thoroughly orthodox viewpoint. Her notes offer, she claimed, local life in the raw: 'these reverses and obverses met me in the first week in Boston.' Nonetheless, the depiction of glaring social contrasts is too consistent to be purely random. A glittering military pageant is played off against furtive figures from the invisible, but swelling army of destitute African-Americans, 'buying tainted meat secretly at dusk from unpainted wagon', gleaming 'Wall-Street ranges, miles of vertical glass' are juxtaposed with drab lines of 'workers waiting for morning-call', and the vaulting, technological brilliance of Brooklyn Bridge, together with 'endless viaducts', soaring, purposeful, joining lives and dreams, set like 'ribs against the sky', yields to a climactic image of human misery and alienation 'at the foot of the uptown buildings, a whiteskinned youthful suicide in blue shirt and grey pants, a working-boy'. Far removed from Hollywood's hollow fables, this is as much the art of honest indignation as Stead's earlier exclamation: 'how is it possible to have unrest poverty and misery in such a rich country', followed by a vignette which contrasts the entrancing beauty of Boston with 'the rottenest slum in my experience'. With heavy brush-strokes, too, she paints the well-to-do as increasingly uneasy in their affluence: 'They are a very tall, fat and muscular, sanguine race but they look troubled. Perhaps the welter of working-races underneath them give them anxious nights'. A universal glumness, she insists, pervades

'the faces of all middle and upper class America'. As does dread of the proletariat. 'Your successful middle-classes display a great hatred of the workers, a strange burning bitterness ... They have a feeling that this country is shackled by economic mishaps, as I have'. The signs spelling out a failed, as well as doomed, social order are in the streets and on the faces for anyone to see. Class conflict seems bound to erupt with great violence after long suppression; there is more than 'just a little steam coming out' of the deep fissures of this nation which she twice likens deterministically to Vesuvius.

Yet all Stead's views were not neatly formatted to meet the party line. Though decrying the 'acute worship of Mammon' as 'horrible, revolting', she could nevertheless claim it partook of 'something marvellous, incredible as the gold halls of Babylon'—the artist fascinated with superabundant manifestations of great wealth, who gave posterity 'A Day at the Redshields' and 'A Stuffed Carp', was not to be denied.²⁴ More disconcerting from an orthodox point of view was the potential contradiction that exists between her highly critical descriptions of America's social disparities, and her scarcely concealed admiration for the almost boundless possibilities of the land and its people. 'If this country ever gets its foot on the starter, what speed there will be: for strangely enough one has the impression that all this production, organisation, machinery is preparation for a long and great journey'. This was unseemly admiration for 'a democracy created by capitalism' on the bedrock of imperial colonies. It recurs, however, and at times even more outspokenly, for there was something intrinsically appealing about the new country that did not conform easily to doctrinaire clichés. Moreover, despite Lincoln Steffens' famous claim that in the Soviet Union he had seen the future and it worked, his own native land, as usual, seemed to hold the key to humanity's further unfolding, so that even a cynically inclined Stead, moved by America's riches and technology, could write:

One wishes for eternal youth in this land (Central Park West lined with giant apartment houses) to see what will happen

²⁴ These incidents are recounted in respectively *The Salzburg Tales* (1934) and *The House of All Nations* (1938).

next. It makes one feel that life has only just started and that the normal span of human life should be about 200 years.

Then, as if to counterbalance this heretical enthusiasm, not dampened by the conspicuous fortunes abutting Central Park, Stead offers a self-placatory afterthought, jammed in between single-spaced lines: 'art should flourish here when labour or socialist party gains ground. Corruption cannot produce good literature'. But neither could socialist dogma, or tamely adhering to the party line. The tension is obvious in Stead's prose, to herself as well as posterity, and her experiences with the American Communist Party would do nothing to lessen it.²⁵

America, as Stead rightly intuited in 1935, was likely to mark a turning point in her own life and the history of mankind, though much still needed to change. Unabashedly she wished for social dislocation and hardship, with the certitude born of Marxist-Leninist dogma: 'no labour party will emerge till your middle-classes are poorer still till great general strikes have shaken the country'. Also her unfolding reflections mirror, and thereby offer mute homage to, the greater dialectical process thought to impel world history. The thesis of naïve first impressions is answered by an antithetical vision of social rupture and impending eruption:

Vulgar civil war for money between boodle-barons and two-gun poachers and bitter class-war with usual cruel fratricidal struggles between workers, union and non-union, lay and police not to mention ever-present terror of black-white struggle: trembled in Harlem to see citadel of the oppressed, early Americans herded together to whom uptown seems faraway.

A reader will search in vain for such savagely forthright verdicts in Geering's version of 'America'. Fittingly, in the original, the ensuing synthesis appropriates Americans' abiding addiction with, their 'heart-dream' of,

25 On the ideological dilemmas encountered there, and their literary consequences, see Michael Ackland, 'Christina Stead and the Politics of Covert Statement', *Mosaic* 43 (2010): 127–42.

'people who "get away" with it'. So, too, may the United States—if the proletariat gains control.

What will this country be like if it ever gets away with it: what will the working classes of this country be like if they ever sweep to power: one almost fears to think of this country free and with everyone rich and no race distinction.

This is what it would take for America to 'get its foot on the starter', to undertake the 'long and great journey', for which it has long been preparing, towards a socialist utopia.

Gazing as a new arrival in the mid-1930s on what she adjudged 'the finest modern country in the world', Stead's excitement, hope and curiosity were almost palpable. Here perhaps she would witness the birth of the socialist homeland of her dreams, most likely she thought 'from south, middle west, Pacific seaboard'. Her heady anticipation had been shared by many, including Friedrich Engels forty years earlier, and she would almost certainly have been familiar with his sentiments:

In such a country, continually renewed waves of advance followed by equally certain set-backs are inevitable. Only the advancing waves are always becoming more powerful, the set-backs less paralysing, and on the whole the thing moves forward all the same. But this I consider certain: the purely bourgeois basis, with no pre-bourgeois swindle behind it, the corresponding colossal energy of the development ... will one day bring about a change which will astonish the whole world. Once the Americans get started it will be with an energy and violence compared with which we in Europe shall be mere children.²⁶

Engels had been right about the qualified advances, about the land's capacity for stunningly energetic development; however, the outcome was by no means certain. Capitalist democracy would not exit

²⁶ Quoted without source in John Strachey, 'The American Scene', *Left Review* 1 (June 1935): 358.

peacefully, and America's citizens were still haunted, according to Stead, by 'the dream of material wealth and social standing'. Even she, though clad in Marxist armour, felt its spell. Staid Boston recalled too vividly English class divisions, with 'poor workers very much underneath'. But in New York she felt the 'mystic might of Rockefeller Centre', and Radio City appeared to her 'like Jacobs ladder'. In 1935 she took stock of the known facts and asked herself candidly: 'What will be the end? Here, as elsewhere I a pilgrim and patriot of your country's patriotism, see that liberty will have to be fought for all over again'. The pilgrim would see her share of fights, but never her version of the Celestial City, and very soon would find herself in a deep Slough of Despond. Decades later her first impressions and revisions would be bequeathed to a nation out of sympathy with her ideology, and edited to suit the times. Stead's political engagement was once again obscured, as well as a crucial phase in her intellectual development, while a manuscript was temporarily assigned to archival oblivion which could have helped explain why the aging author, looking back on American in the 1930s, could exclaim with more than a trace of her former eagerness: 'the whole of society was in ferment, nobody really knew which way the society was going. Oh it was a terrific epoch, very thrilling'.²⁷

27 Ann Whitehead, 'Christina Stead: An Interview', *Australian Literary Studies* 6 (1974): 244.